The American Revolution and the Left

Matei Alexandriu, Tom Canel, Daniel Lazare, Benjamin Studebaker

On October 12, 2024, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel at Boston College on the American Revolution as part of the organization's 2024 East Coast Conference. The speakers were Matei Alexandriu (Congress of Workers' Organizations, New Hampshire),[1] Tom Canel (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; formerly of the Democratic Socialists of America), Daniel Lazare (author of The Frozen Republic[2]*; he has written for* Democratic Constitution[3] *and Weekly Worker[4]), and Benjamin Studebaker (author of* The Chronic Crisis of American Democracy[5]*; formerly of the podcast* What's Left?*). The panel was moderated by D.L. Jacobs. An edited transcript follows.*[6]

Introduction

How was the American Revolution revolutionary? Does the Left today inherit any of the revolutionary tasks of 1776? Should the Left break with or build on the legacy of the American Revolution? How should the Left make sense of recent attempts to reject, reinterpret, or reclaim the revolutionary tradition of 1776?

Opening remarks

Benjamin Studebaker: The central concept in the American Revolution is tyranny. Tyrants arise when polities become thoroughly barbarized, when citizens cease to understand their connection to one another. They become uninterested in developing higher capacities except insofar as those capacities can be put in service of bodily desires. This instrumentalization of the virtues has de-socializing effects over time; it worsens the conditions for cooperation. This produces a political and social breakdown in which it becomes impossible for the city to rule itself. In its barbarized condition it can only function under a master, but because the subjects in a tyranny are barbaric, they cannot be relied upon to serve the master. Fear of the subjects forces the master to become a tyrant, to use fear and terror to intimidate them. Even the tyrant is enslaved by the fear that permeates every part of society, dissolves social ties, and isolates subjects from one another. In naming King George III a tyrant, the American revolutionaries did not just accuse him of corruption and criminality; they accused the entire British system of having devolved into something inhospitable.

To oppose tyranny is to demand freedom, but more importantly, it is to demand the social and political conditions that make freedom possible. Tyranny happens because some non-tyrannical regime allows society to degrade to the point at which tyranny becomes necessary. Tyranny ends because there remains some part of society that, in spite of everything, organizes not just against the tyrant but against tyranny as a condition.

The American Revolution did not kill King George, but it did overcome the tyranny that he personified. It created a new kind of polity that made a certain kind of freedom possible. This freedom was more ambitious than ancient freedom insofar as it was more inclusive. It sought to extend freedom not just to a landed aristocracy but to laborers. But to extend freedom to laborers necessarily involves circumscribing it.

John Adams understood this problem. As Adams put it, he studied politics and war so that his descendants could study, among other things, commerce and agriculture. But that, in turn, was to create a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.[7] To enjoy the highest freedom, it is necessary to pursue activities for their own sake, out of love rather than fear of poverty or violent death. Politics protects against violence, so that commerce can protect against poverty.

But real freedom is freedom from fear and freedom to love, freedom from the activities that are about managing fear — war and commerce. It requires overcoming labor and the necessity for servicing bodily desires. A freedom that identifies with the desires that arise from embodiment and with the labor that is undertaken to satisfy those desires is a regression. It was a regression for John Adams just as much as it was for Plato. But Adams and Plato recognized the necessity of regression. To get real freedom you have to go through tyranny, through politics.

Today, in the United States, there is no recognized right to pursue anything for its own sake. We have become stuck in an inferior kind of freedom. This is not purely because people have misunderstood freedom. We have become stuck for historical reasons: the American Revolution overcame one kind of tyranny, but it has become bound by a commercial logic that comes out of the structure of the world system.

Since World War II, the American state has worked tirelessly to expand capital mobility. This has been done in the name of freedom, the freedom to engage in trade. But over time the effect of this is to strip both governments and workers of their freedom. They are forced to do whatever commerce demands of them, to study whatever will get you a job. People are more limited in what they can study than someone in the 1960s or 70s was, and in that sense less free. Because people are less free, they become estranged from the love that resides dormant within them, the high kind of love that points beyond transactionality or sexuality, beyond pragmatism and *eros*,[8] what the Greeks called *agape*.[9]

This process of stultification is beginning to make tyranny appear necessary. Perhaps it is. Perhaps we have lost the ability to pursue the better kinds of freedom and must rediscover it. But John Adams offered us another possibility: federalism. Through a federal republic, it becomes possible to qualify commercial competition, to set rules that limit the degree to which that competition determines our form of life. The purpose of federalism is not to subject everyone to a Bonapartist state; it is to use the political to qualify the commercial so as to make space for the romantic and the spiritual. This is not to negate commerce. Commerce is necessary to reach a stage in which the romantic and spiritual are universally available. Prior to commerce, there was war and politics alone.

The British empire, through its mercantilism, put commerce at the service of war. Adams understood that it was necessary to put politics at the service of commerce, to make the world safe for trade, but that was a beginning rather than an end. Ultimately, politics must come back out from underneath commerce, not to restore the supremacy of war but to allow us to move beyond fear itself.

What we need is a new federalism that can qualify commerce and make capital mobility a servant rather than a master. This is a project of overcoming the tyranny of the commercial itself. What is needed is a serious commitment on the part of young people to theorizing and constructing a new polity. This requires us to qualify our own freedom, to step away from the highest kinds of human activity and think in a practical, instrumental way that engages with our conditions, with necessity.

The American revolutionaries did not just have ideas. They built things and put themselves in mortal peril. We need their courage, not just to fight for freedom but to fight for love. It is not enough to demand freedom for all. We must build a world in which the highest kind of freedom is possible for all, the freedom to love un-pragmatically. It is only when animated by this kind of love that we can say with Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin that "rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."[10]

Tom Canel: The interest in resurrecting the American Revolution as a source of inspiration for Marxists has predecessors on the American Left. My first example of this is the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) during the Popular Front era. In the early 1930s, the international communist movement came to the conclusion that its previous "class against class" politics had enabled the accession to power of Nazism in Germany and the continuation of these politics would not help fight fascism globally. As a result, national communist parties were instructed to build broad progressive coalitions — popular fronts — in their own countries. As an aid to this, the national communist parties were to celebrate the progressive traditions of their respective countries. In the U.S. this took the form of the CPUSA claiming that "communism is 20th century Americanism,"[11] and on one occasion its youth wing, the Young Communist League, boasted that it celebrated 1776 much more assiduously than organizations of the Right such as the Daughters of the American Revolution. However, particularly since the Cold War and the New Left engendered by it, anti-imperialism has been seen as opposition to American imperialism in particular. Any celebration, therefore, of the American heritage, including the Revolution of 1776, has become anathema to much of the Left.

My second example of American Leftists celebrating 1776 would be Michael Harrington, founder of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. Like the CPUSA during their Popular Front period, he saw an emancipatory content to the American Revolution. For whatever reasons — and historians can be cynical about this — the Declaration of Independence substituted for property rights references to the pursuit of happiness.[12] For Harrington and others, the Declaration thereby opens up space for arguing that if particular property relations become a fetter upon the general pursuit of happiness, it is right to challenge those relations. It is through buttressing challenges to predominant property relations in this way that the legacy of 1776 could potentially be a resource for the Left today.

There is also the argument that socialism must take the form of a reaffirmation of the bourgeois right over one's own labor. This is a right for which the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke famously argued. However, rather than having a socialist potential, Locke's discourse can become a justification for capitalism, if only before-the-fact. In the *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), in which Locke affirms the right to one's own labor, he argues that it violates nobody's rights for someone to hire someone else as an employee. Locke also explicitly endorses the right of an employer to appropriate the fruits of, and therefore to make a profit from, their employees' labor. The unlimited accumulation of nonperishable wealth is also endorsed by Locke.

I claim there were two souls driving the creation of the American republic: one a soul committed to enabling the general pursuit of happiness which is embodied in the Declaration of Independence, and a soul committed to the affirmation of Lockean property rights which is embodied most explicitly in the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. I admit that most of the American revolutionaries of the late 18th century would have seen this as a distinction without a difference, but from our viewpoint within advanced capitalism, we should make a point of this distinction.

4 The fundamental law by which society governs itself

James Otis, revolutionary Boston, and the Constitution

James Vaughn

www:

Sleeping through the counterrevolution

Feeling the death of the Left

Ethan Linehan

"The right enemies"

An interview with Matei Alexandriu

Noah Rogers

1 The American Revolution and the Left

Matei Alexandriu, Tom Canel, Daniel Lazare, Benjamin Studebaker

3 Bonapartism is not Bonaparte

Chris Cutrone

The Platypus Review

Issue 177 | June 2025

Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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Bonapartism is not Bonaparte

Chris Cutrone

> Just as every cop is a criminal
> And all the sinners saints
> As heads is tails, just call me Lucifer
> 'Cause I'm in need of some restraint
> — Rolling Stones, "Sympathy for the Devil" (1968)

Two theories

THERE ARE TWO DISTINCT THEORIES of "Bonapartism": one liberal; the other Marxist. The liberal theory of Bonapartism is about "strong-man rule" and focused on the character of the political leader; the Marxist theory is with respect to the role of the state in capitalism. Liberalism takes Napoleon Bonaparte or Julius Caesar as exemplary; Marxism developed its theory on the occasion and figure of Louis Bonaparte particularly, but also other contemporary phenomena more generally, such as Palmerston, Gladstone and Disraeli in the UK, and Bismarck in Prussian Empire Germany. Bonapartism for Marxism is not Napoleon but Louis. For what happened historically between them is capitalism — the necessity and possibility of socialism.

Louis Bonaparte was for Marx a Bonapartist figure from his very election as President of the Second Republic in 1848, and not merely after his "18th Brumaire" coup d'état in 1851 or in his Second Empire of 1852–70. Moreover, the Marxist theory addressed Bonapartism as an expression of the crisis of bourgeois society and the state in capitalism, linked to its dialectical opposite: the historical necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Needless to say, liberalism does not concur with this latter conclusion.

Napoleon Bonaparte, who famously blamed "ideologists" for the travails of the Revolution, later prognosed from prison in exile on St. Helena that in "50 years Europe will be either Cossack or republican." That meant that if the democratic republic — the revolution — did not prevail, it would be the police-state instead. He didn't reckon with capitalism for this outcome. Marx concluded that the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat was the condition for achieving the democratic republic — but on the way to the "withering away of the state," in overcoming capitalism and achieving socialism and communism. The achievement of the proletarian socialist revolution will be the final battle of democracy. But the result of the frustrated 1848 revolutions was what Marx called the "Cossack republic" — Bonapartism: the state as its own special caste ruling over society.

Louis Bonaparte was a repetition of Napoleon insofar as there are still political figures trying simultaneously to revolutionize and preserve the state. But in the era of capitalism it is not the squabbling of political factions driving the need for a strong leader to master them, but the subordination of politics to bureaucratic imperatives necessitated by capitalism, in which the apparent political leader is actually just a figurehead of a process of rule that constrains the very choices available from which politicians can possibly choose. The Marxist view of capitalism is that the needs of capital overrule all other considerations. But this can appear as a function of the mere failure of politics; whereas in actuality it is the self-contradiction of society in capitalism that drives antinomical values and irresolvable conflicts, presenting impossible choices among bad alternatives. Such choices can be deferred and avoided, or done in hidden and unaccountable ways.

One way that the state mediates society is through political parties that vet and select viable political characters who can serve the role of making bureaucracy something to which the public can assent: a convincing rationalization for what must be done anyway. This means that political parties will be present only as necessary to perform this mediation. Insofar as they are unnecessary for bureaucracy to function, they will wither in their ability to win the popular consent of the governed. Discontents will provoke crises of political parties and their renovation, or the emergence of new parties to take their place.

In this respect, Bonapartism is a tendency of the state and politics in capitalism, endemic but expressed more or less prominently at different moments in its history.

Bonapartism in the 20th century

20th-century Marxism regarded the new phenomenon of fascism as a species of Bonapartism — Leon Trotsky considered Stalinism in the USSR, which was not personal but bureaucratic rule, as a phenomenon of Bonapartism. (Liberals called Stalinism "red fascism"; many 20th-century Marxists agreed.) How did Marx and Marxism define Bonapartism? It was a situation in which the "bourgeoisie can no longer, and the proletariat not yet rule." This increasingly took the form of either the exacerbation of class struggle or the submerging of class in the Marxist sense into the mass of society, seen in the indistinct separation of, yet still opposition between society and the state. This was for Marxism not a contingent circumstance but a permanent condition of capitalism after 1848. As Walter Benjamin put it, the "state of emergency" is not momentary but constant: it is not the exception but the rule.[1] What characterized Bonapartism for Marxism? The state rising above society and becoming a power in itself — indeed as an end in itself. This is increasingly the case as capitalism develops — as the contradiction and crisis of capitalism grows.

What was the "contradiction and crisis of capitalism," according to Marxism? The contradiction of "bourgeois social relations of labor" and "industrial forces of production." In capitalism; this was a crisis of "socialism or barbarism": capitalism was barbarized bourgeois society, necessitating socialism — workers were reduced from humanistic free artisans in society to wage-slave "appendages of the machine." The state in capitalism is the key phenomenon of this: not Hobbes's majestic Leviathan of the bourgeois social contract but a monstrous abomination, the Behemoth of damnation in the Devil's bargain of capitalism.

Bonapartism is characterized for Marxism by precisely the *inability* of leading political figures to render society and the state tractable: Louis Bonaparte is the "farce," compared to Napoleon's (and Caesar's) "tragedy," because of his futility; he is not a cunning hero but a comedic villain. Where celestial forces swirl around a protagonist of Divine Fate, instead, we have the folly and error of someone who is merely "human, all-too human" (Nietzsche): not punished but merely scorned by the gods. While the conquering Napoleon summoned Goethe to insist that "there is no Destiny, only politics," he was for Hegel nonetheless the "World Soul" of eternal History[2] when he rode his horse into town at the young professor's first academic appointment. Louis Bonaparte is not the substantial character of political action, but a holographic projection of greater forces that neither he nor anyone else can master: "Bonapartism" is Marx/ism's term for the self-alienation of politics in capitalism. As Marx summed it up about the plebeian masses in capitalism (petite bourgeoisie, lumpenproletariat, et al. — including workers, insofar as they are not self-organized into a social and political force of their own): they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented; they will be represented.[3] Bonapartism means the state represents everyone and no one. The state is universal but also its own particular interest.

Police and military are "citizens in uniform" — as are bureaucrats — and hence playing a role that anyone could; and yet in capitalism they become their own specific caste apart from everyone. This is not merely a function of specialized knowledge but of role: the peculiar political role of the state in capitalism. Bureaucracy is considered by Marxism to be endemic in capitalism differently from its role in traditional civilization, which was of course a caste system that bourgeois society is not or at least is not supposed to be. Bureaucracy is a function of reification of social and political activity in an alienated society.

For liberalism, by contrast, Bonapartism is a historical accident and mistake to be avoided; like all crime, it is the responsibility of a bad actor. For Marxism, however, it is not an error or moral infraction of wrong choice but inevitable, because it expresses a necessity in capitalism: if the historical necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat leading to socialism is not met, then the inexorable result is Bonapartism. What is this necessity? For the state to manage the crisis of capitalism.

Liberalism treats Bonapartism as the cause; whereas for Marxism it is only the effect. This feature of the capitalist state is more or less prominent; but it is not an acute but a chronic condition: it is not a bug of the political system but its very origin. "Out, damned spot!" is the guilty conscience of political action: "To be, or not to be, that is the question." But this is not a question of the supposed violent founding of the political state.

Marxism agreed with liberal political thought that society should subordinate the state; and politics would be of minimal importance in the life and course of mankind. What raised politics to its primacy in the 19th century was the "social question" that drove the popular demand for "democracy": the need for the state to ameliorate the condition of the proletariat. Emergency measures were meant only to return bourgeois society to its normal life of peaceful commerce, without coercive force or violence. But the capitalist state established new institutions of police and prisons and a permanent standing army. The police are Bonapartist, not the politicians trying to control them; Bonapartism is the police-state, not the elected civilian authorities mandated by democracy. The police are meant to be the instruments of politics; but politics becomes the instrument of the state.

With the police-state also comes lawfare, which is no less Bonapartist, in that it reduces the law to a weapon and the judiciary to a competing executive authority. The law becomes mere power-play of casuistic manipulation. It is, as Edmund Burke warned about what the Jacobins represented, the rule of sophistry in service of venality. Shakespeare might have been critical of the motives for characters uttering "first, we kill all the lawyers," but they appear justified today.

How did such a counterrevolution against the original bourgeois revolution and modern liberal-democratic republic come about? Through the need to control the proletariat: the more or less chronically unemployed masses constantly produced by capitalism out of the petite bourgeoisie; those thrown in and out of wage-labor in the continuously revolutionized industrial society. This called for extraordinary powers of the state, clamored for not only by the capitalist haute bourgeoisie but by the workers themselves: the social security and welfare programs demanded to counteract the displacements of capitalist upheaval — no one can count on the wages earned either by themselves or members of their family — and the forces required to contain the pathologies of the increasing numbers of broken and breaking members of the disintegrating social contract. There is no social-welfare-state without the police-state. The state is inseparable from the spreading cancer in the organic metabolism of society, in the end for which the cure proves to be worse than the disease; but there are no other available treatments for the inescapable condition. There is only political wrangling to try to control it, which in the end proves futile. It is much easier for the police to get rid of politicians than the reverse.

Marxism disagreed with liberalism that a strong constitution would stave off and prevent the malady; what happened instead was the constant abrogation of the law in order to preserve the law: "bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies in the name of order"[4] — by workers armed by the state. Worse still, the state itself becomes inseparable from crime: the powerful are merely the stronger criminals; the police are merely the most powerful gang, observing an honor code for protecting its own colors. And "politics" became indistinguishable from racketeering: as Foucault wryly commented, the "path of power leads to either politics or prison" — often both. To fall from the grace of political favor means being charged with a criminal offense. Politics becomes the court intrigue of clannish dynastic struggles; more prosaically, it means bureaucratic in-fighting among craven careerists, reduced to mere profiteering off the public misery once they realize the limited good they can do. In capitalism, bureaucratic "experts" are competent not in their fields of specialization so much as in gaming the system, in which public benefit is only a by-product of their private vice (the reverse of Mandeville's "private vice leading to public benefit"[5] in competition that proves to be cooperation). This potential abuse was supposed to be curtailed by limiting power; but society in its capitalist deformations and pathologies requires greater scope of action than can ever be admitted in principle. Everyone does what they can get away with, clothed in the justification of exigency — until they find themselves caught out and exposed, if and when their actions fail to serve adequately the interests of other powerful people.

Superficially, this picture resembles Ancient Athens or Rome, or perhaps the Italian Renaissance of the Medicis and Borgias. But, no, this is a specifically modern problem of capitalism.

Trump: Bonaparte contra Bonapartism?

Donald Trump arrived as a tribune of the people to vanquish "Crooked Hillary and Joe," who seemed to symbolize everything that had seemingly gone wrong in the prior two (or three) Presidencies: the bankrupt frauds of neoliberalism and neoconservatism under (Clinton,) Bush and Obama; but he ended up confronting the Deep State instead. The drama that has unfolded on the political stage of the Age of Trump has been "phantasmagorical" indeed: it is a shadow-play of smoke-and-mirrors in the lurid lantern show at the apparent twilight of the American Empire.

"Conspiracy theories" are the essence of Bonapartism as a political phenomenon. The opening act of "Who killed Vince Foster?," and the "vast Right-wing conspiracy" of "bimbo explosions" detonating around Monica Lewinsky's blue dress, was shuffled off the stage, in favor of 9/11 "Truth," and finally replaced by Pizzagate Washington pedophile rings revealed by QAnon; the Dirty Dossier and "Pee Tape" speculated by MI6 and Hillary Clinton; Mossad's Kompromat factory on Epstein Island; and Hunter Biden's Laptop from Hell — loudly attested by top intelligence officers to have "all the hallmarks of a Russian disinformation campaign." Who's the actual Manchurian Candidate, and who are they working for? Russia? Israel? China? Ukraine? Various kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula? The KGB surviving the demise of the USSR? The Illuminati? Davos? Bohemian Grove? Reptilians of the Hollow Earth? UFOs/UAPs? — There is more than enough evidence to "prove" them all.

The opacity is the point — the paranoia of misapprehension: the seeming impossibility of ever getting to the bottom of things in politics. The point is that with bureaucratic rule in the administrative state, the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. Did Anthony Fauci expose us to COVID or save us from it? Perhaps both. Trump's crusade against the Deep State and its elusive, apparently "secret" ruling class is either insincere, part of the ruse pulling the wool over our eyes; or, if sincere, quixotic. In any case it's a wild gamble, by either Trump himself or the public that voted for him. Trump is "keeping all his promises," and has been (painfully) transparent in all his actions. Elon Musk joined Trump on stage for the variety act as either point-man or fall-guy: he's actually running the government as the power behind the throne; or perhaps he's a court-jester as celebrity volunteer from the audience for performing a magic trick — the richest dupe of the powers-that-be the world has even seen, whose wealth is just that much liability when his wild goose chase comes up empty — in either deuces or snake-eyes. DOGE's slashing the Deep State turned out to be a fool's errand. At the same time, there are such lingering questions from recent political history as: who couped Joe Biden; why was his Afghanistan withdrawal — prepared politically by Trump — so botched; how was Kamala picked to begin with; and even "What is a woman?" (Why are we even asking such questions?)

How did all this happen? — Where did it go so completely wrong? But wasn't it happening all the time? Trump's election besets the "Left" with problems going back at least a couple of generations now. Like the New Left, culminating not in "revolution" but Nixon in 1968 and Reagan in 1980, all the talk of "socialism" for the last couple of decades resulted in: Trump. Does this mean that he is Hitler stopping Communism? Of course not.

The Nixonite true believers in the "Unitary Executive" are not seized by the ghost of Carl Schmitt, formulating Constitutional justifications for a "fascist" seizure of power, albeit in American terms. No. The problem goes back to the height of the American Century itself: Eisenhower's specter of the "Military-Industrial Complex™." If the Deep State killed (both) Kennedy(s and Malcolm and MLK) and ousted Nixon, then perhaps the same struggle is being fought out today. If the American Republic became an Empire in Vietnam and the War on Terror, then the silver-spooned draft-dodger has come to stop it. Can it be done? Liberalism will claim to try; but Marxism says: no.

Unlike the Bonaparte of Bonapartism, as either hero or villain, Trump is coming not at the beginning but the end of a history — or the dawn of a new one. He repeats the history of either the liberal or Marxist story of Bonapartism: both and neither. We are always in capitalism simultaneously in 1776/1789 and 1848/1876: in bourgeois revolution and capitalist counterrevolution. The infamous John Eastman Memo, seeking to justify Trump's disputing the electoral outcome of 2020, pointed as precedence to two very different events: the Jeffersonian Revolution of 1800; and the counterrevolution against Reconstruction in 1876 — the former defending and extending the spirit of the American Revolution; the latter bringing about an "18th Brumaire" coup against the intentions of Lincoln and U.S. Grant and the results of the revolutionary Civil War and its abolition of slavery, to "restore order" and consolidate a Bonapartist capitalist state in America.

We have been told not to "normalize" Trump; we are asked what we are currently doing when "first they come for . . ." and during an "actual genocide." How will history judge Trump? How will posterity judge us? But this is indeed the "normal" state of affairs during the history of capitalism — even given Benjamin's warning against treating "fascism as the norm." History is not coming to an end; its bloody saga will continue.

Deportations

For instance, Trump's unjust deportations are clearly political in character: he promised to deport the "Palestine solidarity" protesters ("useful idiots" and the rest) and all the immigrants Biden let in when he opened the border — especially and starting with the gangsters. — Indeed, it's very easy to find links for the Palestine protests to actual gangsters through Hamas, since terrorism necessarily operates in the criminal netherworld, as does of course capitalist politics more generally; and anyway, not only the politicians but the universities and their "good works" are funded and founded by the more or less dirty, laundered money of ill-gotten gains — organized crime. But the Palestinians' only hope is Trump; and Trump is deporting people now at a slower pace than Biden or Obama.

It's not as if there weren't unjust detentions and deportations before Trump: it's just that he is proudly demagoguing and photo op-ing them in broad daylight; whereas previously it went on in the dark of night — it is the latter not the former which is characteristic of the Bonapartist state for Marxism. While Trump could be challenged in the public sphere and voted upon, Biden and Obama could not; it's hard to say exactly that Trump was elected to institute injustice, that his voters wanted to strengthen the state — one could argue that it was quite the opposite. The outcome of a plebiscite is always ambiguous, but especially in capitalist politics. Are the voters saints or sinners? No matter: the bureaucratic machine, once set in motion, as a function more or less of popular will, is necessarily and not accidentally — inevitably — a juggernaut rolling over all questions of justice. It's all apparently very "democratic."

Everyone hates the cops until they need them; and aren't our taxes paying for the police salaries, so shouldn't they serve the public better — serve and not abuse us? But: police cannot exist without wrongful arrests and unjustified use of force; prosecutors cannot exist without wrongful convictions; prisons cannot exist without innocent people languishing and dying in them. But focusing on the brutality of deportations leaves aside the violence of migration itself, for instance and not least, the rank exploitation and profiteering and even enslavement of "human trafficking" that is inseparable from it — against which Trump loudly proclaims to be fighting, and indeed as his priority concern.

Trump's opponents don't have the monopoly on compassion. Far from it. From the very moment he descended the golden escalator of Trump Tower, he called out by name the "rapists and murderers" of the cartels controlling the Mexican border. Who are their primary victims? The migrants themselves. As Marx long ago observed, right is on both sides of the contradictions of capitalism; and each side in its one-sidedness demagogues everything, such that all public exposés and accusations of injustice serve as just so much apologetic propaganda and political cover on the part of the accusers. Meanwhile, the needs of capitalism grind on.

Bonapartism and socialism

Where Hegel found in Napoleon the rogue to play a hero's part, in Louis Bonaparte and other contemporary phenomena Marx finds that even heroes inevitably play the part of rogues in capitalism. Even and perhaps especially trying to do good results in evil: as Hegel described it, "the Unreason which is associated not only with them, but even (rather we might say *especially*) with *good* designs and righteous aims."[6] This is where liberalism maintains a point: we should avoid empowering the state as much as possible; but Marxism recognizes that this is actually impossible in capitalism. If we don't understand that Trump is actually trying to do good, then we will understand nothing about what is really happening and why.

Napoleon was a Jacobin, and Louis Bonaparte was a Saint-Simonian Utopian Socialist. They claimed to defend the Revolution, but expressed its inherent limits. In the case of Louis Bonaparte, or Bonapartism per se, those limits are those of capitalism. The political limits of capitalism are found in bureaucratic rule.

Where liberalism treats the history of capitalism as the end of the world, Marxism finds the end of the world, as ever, in History. As Adorno wrote, "the world has survived its downfall"[7]; but "its end today is not the end."[8] Our farce in the Play for Today is that the Kafkaesque bureaucratic labyrinth is not a grand Existential allegory but a real one: "There is an infinite amount of hope in the universe, but not for us." — Kafka's humor is easily lost on the melancholic! For Marxism, there was no way out of politics but politics; but only as socialist politics: the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat — not as a millennial dream, but as the real bid for power against the capitalist state. Will it end in tragedy? (— Children, please don't go to prison!)

Whether as Napoleon or Louis, with Trump as with them, "Bonapartism" is not Bonaparte: not the figure, but the condition is historically significant. But this still means that "there is no Destiny, only politics." There will be a future for capitalism and capitalist politics; will there be for socialism — will there be the "class struggle" for the dictatorship of the proletariat, or only the Bonapartism of the capitalist state?

For Marxism, the only politics that matters in capitalism — the only actual politics of world-historic consequence — is the "class struggle"; but: "Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat" (Lenin, *The State and Revolution*). Today, we have only the pseudo-politics of the delusional pseudo-reality and the "normative psychosis of the political social world"[9] of the state in capitalism: it is Bonapartism — not Bonaparte. **| P**

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn, et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2006), 392.

[2] For what is eternal in history is freedom — its transformation. From G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, in *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 96, 127–28: "While we are thus concerned exclusively with the Idea of Spirit, and in the History of the World regard everything as only its manifestation, we have, in traversing the past — however extensive its periods — only to do with what is *present*; for philosophy,

"Bonapartism is not Bonaparte" continues on page 4

The fundamental law by which society governs itself

James Otis, revolutionary Boston, and the Constitution

James Vaughn

On October 12, 2024, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted the panel, "1776 and 2024: Revolutionary Boston and capitalist politics today," at Boston College, as part of its 2024 East Coast Conference. The panel featured three Platypus members: James Vaughn, Spencer Leonard, and Erin Hagood. James Vaughn's edited opening remarks follow.[1]

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN with a quotation from Bernard Bailyn, whom I consider the greatest late-20th-century historian of colonial revolutionary America. In a bicentennial speech in 1976, he wrote:

> A single characteristic of this later Revolutionary period predominates. Despite depressions, doubts, and fears for the future and despite the universal easing of ideological fervor, the general mood remained high through all of these years. There was a freshness and boldness in the tone of the eighties, a continuing belief that the world was still open, that young, energetic, daring, hopeful, imaginative men had taken charge and were drawing their power directly from the soil of the society they ruled and not from a distant, capricious, unmanageable sovereign. It was not simply that new forms of government were being devised. A new civilization, it was felt, a civilization whose origins could now be seen to have lain in the earliest years of settlement, was being created, free from the weight of the past, free from the corruption and inflexibility of the tangled old-regime whose toils had so encumbered Americans in the late colonial period. . . . Far from the 1780s being a conservative or "counterrevolutionary" period that culminated in a Thermidor at Philadelphia and far from that decade being dominated by self-searching despair for the future of republican hopes, those years witnessed a vast release of American energies that swept forward into every corner of life.[2]

Bailyn pushes against the narrative, established by the progressives of the early 20th century and the New Left neo-progressives of the 1960s and 70s, that the later 1770s and 80s had been a dark period and a counter-revolutionary period.

I fully agree with Bailyn's quotation, but nevertheless I would like to offer a friendly amendment. He says that the 1780s were the realization of the 1760s and 70s because they had broken from an alien, trans-Atlantic, distant sovereign, and their sovereignty was rooted in the soul of their own society. I would rather say that they had placed sovereignty not in their own society, but in society itself, and had for the first time achieved the sovereignty of society over itself: a self-governing society in which the state becomes an instrument of society as a whole. There were people all over the world who were struggling precisely to realize the sovereignty of society. The only real success of the American Revolution is to have achieved this in one area of the world, and to have built political institutions that lasted beyond the revolutionary ferment of the later 18th century into and through a fully developed capitalist modernity.

What is this society of which I am speaking? I simply mean "society" here in the double-sense of "civil society" (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) in which the Hegelian and Marxist tradition uses it. Civil society is in one sense all social relations between people that constituted the new form of society — "bourgeois society," or, the society of the social relations of free laborers — emerging from the post-medieval, Western world. On the other hand, a successfully constituted civil society that politically organizes itself creates another layer of civil society, which is what social scientists generally mean by it in our own day: those voluntary associations of everyday life. When I say "civil society," I mean it in both senses: the totality of all the reciprocal bourgeois social relations greater than the sum of their parts, and furthermore how once this is politically institutionalized through the universality of law, the consolidated realm of everyday life where free laborers voluntarily interact and exchange with one another. This may have local expressions. There may be a "civil society" in colonial British North America in the United States, but it is simply the consolidation of a global phenomenon of bourgeois social relations through successful political and institutional organization. Local developments very much depend on the development of global social relations.

By the time of the 18th century, bourgeois society had become aware of itself. This is simply what we call the Enlightenment. The introduction of bourgeois society brought an unprecedented level of sociality, which both creates something greater than the sum of its parts, or society as such, and retrospectively allows us to see that there had always been an organization of reciprocal relations amongst people — "societies" — but they had never been as fully social as the bourgeois society of the 18th century. That greater reciprocity of relations amongst people allows for more individuality than ever before, and that greater individuality in turn contributes to a much greater development of sociality. Here, I am just giving a basic reading of Rousseau.

Nevertheless, there was an issue in the 18th century: how do you politically organize and consolidate the potential of society? How does society govern itself? How does it develop a political agency rooted in itself and responsible to itself? Hobbes was the first to clearly pose this problem in *Leviathan* (1651). His answer was to erect a common power, an absolute sovereign that was the expression of society as a whole, but which became estranged from society and dominated it as an alien political force. Practically, it took the seventeenth-century English Revolution and theoretically, it took John Locke to subject Hobbes's alien, sovereign power to society itself, through which it was understood that the Constitutional Monarchy and Parliamentary settlement created by 1688 represents the self-government of society, because parliament makes the laws of deliberative assembly. Because the state cannot rule without parliament, it cannot rule beyond the law. Unlike what Jean Bodin and Hobbes said — that you cannot have law without someone who gives the law but does not receive it — the point of 1688 and Locke is to say that the giver of the law must also receive it. There can be no alien, absolute sovereign power outside of and unaccountable to the society over which it rules.

Nevertheless, the British Parliamentary regime was at best a partial implementation of this revolutionary project. It was an oligarchic, parliamentary, absolutist, corrupt realization of this transformation, and it is left to the thinkers of the mid-18th century, above all Rousseau, to rearticulate the tasks of a society that governs itself. This is the highest achievement of Rousseau's principle of the general will, which understood that for people to be fully self-determining individuals, they must inhabit a sociality that involves heteronomy: receiving the law from outside themselves. Rousseau is asking how the people can be involved in such heteronomy while remaining autonomous. He points out that people can only be genuinely free as individuals within a free sociality, in which they benefit from society's transformation of the world in history, while on the other hand, such a society can only benefit from free individuals who are self-determining and innovative.

What does any of this have to do with the American Revolution, or the events in Boston? For one, many people throughout revolutionary North America were influenced by Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762). It was being read all over the Western world in the 1760s — not just by Thomas Jefferson. But more substantively, what is achieved in the American Revolution, for which Boston is a key theater, is precisely the first and only lasting institutionalization of a self-governing society, which is achieved, above all, in the American Constitution. American revolutionaries turn, for the first time, to writing constitutions, because they are attempting to institutionalize the general will. It is precisely the idea that the state does not create the fundamental law, but rather the fundamental law creates the state. There may be something in the state called the legislature that makes laws, but those are merely ordinary, regular laws, made by representatives who are elected and determined through a given system. The law-making or legislative power is controlled by a higher law, a fundamental law, which is the general will of society as a whole. Law pre-exists the state. The state, even when it is making law, such as in the legislative body, or enforcing law in the executive body, or interpreting law in the judicial body, is controlled by a higher law that is in no way, shape, or form ever created by the state, but is rather produced by the totality of the people themselves as a social collectivity.

The turn to writing constitutions is the attempt to put down on paper the law-giving power of the people. When people want to rewrite their fundamental law, they must come together in great conventions and assemblies with supermajorities to change it, because they are not merely changing ordinary law. That is why they erect such high obstacles to constitutional change. It is not that they do not imagine constitutional change, but that it must be the totality of society reflecting and deliberating on itself and overwhelmingly agreeing to do so.

These ideas first clearly emerged here in Boston. Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the colonies of British North America had considered themselves provinces or constituent parts of a British empire of liberty, ultimately rooted in England and above all in London. Originally, the goal of European colonialism was to try to reconstitute the social order of the mother country, but in the colonial environment they failed to constitute those old metropolitan social orders. They did not successfully implant a titled aristocracy, vast religious establishments, standing armies, and Old Regime monarchies. Quite unintentionally, new bourgeois social relations began to constitute a new social order, involving far less of a compromise with the past than in Europe, because of the failure of traditional social forms to carry themselves across the Atlantic. In a word, all land is essentially commercial; all labor beyond the slave plantations is essentially free and unleashed from patterns of deference and tradition accumulated in the Old World.

As a result, colonial North America becomes the most rapidly developing place in the world prior to the industrial revolution. The free laboring populations here develop socially and economically at a quicker rate than had ever happened before in human history. They go from being under 200,000 people in 1700 to over 2 million at the time of the Revolution, which is not merely the most rapid demographic advance in the history of the world hitherto, but also, as Adam Smith tells us, not merely a quantitative change in demography. Qualitatively, the people are relating and interacting with one another differently than ever before. As he puts it, the natural course of liberty realizes its fullest expression here. They have the highest rate of per-capita income in human history by the 1740s and 50s. It is their social relations rather than their demographic growth that makes them economically and socially prosperous to a degree previously unseen. As Smith says, the surest sign of a free and wealthy society is one in which the common people have a lot of children who live into old age.

In the 1760s and 70s, there comes the imperial crisis. During and after the Seven Years' War (1756–63), the British political elite begin to take the empire in a politically autocratic and economically extractive direction. They do this on the basis of the idea that King George and Parliament itself are absolutely sovereign, outside of and beyond society. They begin articulating that essentially Hobbesian point that society must create something outside of itself, the state, that then turns around and controls society, and that social relations have to be held together by an unaccountable state divinity, a mortal God as Hobbes called it and as Parliament thinks of itself by the 1760s. One of the ways this manifests is that the Parliamentary regime begins insisting on enforcing the laws of trade navigation. These were laws regulating trade and shipping throughout the British empire and in the colonies. In the early 1760s, they pass new writs of assistance, which are general warrants that do not specify a criminal charge or perpetrator; they simply empower magistrates to search houses, storefronts, and ships across colonial America, and most importantly port cities like Boston, for contraband goods, on the basis of their own suspicions. They could knock on your door, wake you up at night, search everything, and go to your business without any proof of a judge having been convinced of a reason to name a specific place or person. If they find any contraband goods, you are tried without a jury in an admiralty court in which the judge is appointed by and responsible to the crown in London. Such a courtroom is the domain of the state, not civil society. If you are found guilty, the royally appointed judge keeps a portion of the rewards, payments, and fines of the contraband discovered. You can see how such a state, even if it is initially just minor contraband, could quickly become wholly removed from society and operate as its destroyer rather than its protector.

The first person who makes this clear is James Otis, Jr., whose grave we will visit tomorrow. He gives a speech about the writs of assistance in the Massachusetts Bay Superior Court, where many people are gathered who subsequently become key founders and revolutionaries — most famously John Adams — who essentially say that their minds were transformed by that speech. James Otis was a Massachusetts Bay Colony jurist defending people charged under the writs of assistance. In the Massachusetts Bay Superior Court, he moves the spotlight away from the alleged criminal activity of civilians and instead gives a lengthy oral disquisition on the corruption of such charges. As he says, the court has no standing here in Boston; the entire authority is illegal; the real criminality is their attempt to put these men on trial, and therefore society must now try the customs inspector and magistrates, because they have become enslavers of and criminals against society.

James Otis goes on to write a number of newspaper essays and pamphlets. The most famous one is *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (1764), partially in response to the Sugar Act.[3] There, Otis lays out the case that the first law of all political communities is the fundamental law by which society governs itself. Before people are political, they are social. They establish reciprocal relations between one another. They are able to have a sociality independent of the state — a division of labor, exchange of goods and services, culture, science, families, and kinship communities. Therefore, the state is not the creator of law but the law's first upholder. The picture he paints of what happened in the Glorious Revolution is that the then king of England—the absolutist monarch King James II who is overthrown in the course of the revolution—represented the state running roughshod over society, until society gathered together and overthrew him, after which Parliament held a convention to draw up a fundamentally new social compact. Otis says, you can never perfectly institutionalize the fundamental law of society, but the British Constitution written at the time of the Glorious Revolution (1688) represented the closest approximation to the natural constitution of society. Hence, he says, the British were the freest among nations, as all British subjects in the colonies, black and white, had civil rights irrespective of their rights in British law. There is a higher law of society beyond any of its concrete institutionalizations. Civil rights are not created by the state but by our sociality. What are the immanent needs of that sociality? That we want to be free, self-determining people, but we realize that this requires reciprocal relations with others. We must accept common rules, regulations, and laws from outside ourselves — heteronomy — that we nevertheless would make ourselves — autonomy — realizing that free society forms the basis of even greater individuality.

Later, Otis gets in a fight with a customs inspector in a Boston coffeehouse, is bludgeoned over the head, and becomes a mentally unstable figure needing to be cared for by others. John Adams was his greatest mentee. William Tudor wanted to write a biography of James Otis, which delighted Adams, who famously tells Tudor, "As long as North America shall have a soul it will sell and immortalize your name [William Tudor] as well as mine, for James Otis was the real father and founder of the American empire more certainly than Romulus that of the Roman."[4] He means that John Adams, Peter Oxenbridge Thacher, the whole Bostonian patriot movement, and all the other patriots corresponding throughout the colonies had essentially come to conclude, following Otis, that there was a fundamental law of society that was higher than any institutionalization of the British Constitution, and if those institutions violated it, they could take up arms, not to destroy society but to preserve it, from the true anarchists, rebels, and destroyers of the bonds of society: the Constitutional Monarchy and the Parliamentary regime acting arbitrarily against it.

That was the key move to the realization that they needed a written constitution. A modernizing commercial society in which people are involved in their own affairs and ensconced in an extensive division of labor requires a representative liberal democratic system rather than a direct one, because the people cannot spend all their days making laws. They should simply make laws that allow for a free society to pursue its own aims and interests, not laws that determine how they live their lives. Such a social-political order requires a fundamental law that undergirds society as a whole, represented in the document of the constitution. Without having to convene constantly, give up their private lives, abandon their families, and relinquish their in order to debate laws all day, members of society need a written constitution that embodies such an assembly of all the people prior to forming the political order, which in turn would represent the higher fundamental law that controls the state itself. In other words, the constitution is the revolutionary institutionalization of the general will, meant to control the state and everyday lawmaking itself. It is in this way that many people, such as Samuel Adams, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Paine retrospectively realize how much Otis's arguments contain what they end up doing when they build the new regime in the 1780s.

Today, people who present themselves as progressive and more enlightened say that the U.S. Constitution is from an archaic dark age when everybody was a family farmer and therefore it is meaningless and only constricts us. Of course, society has changed since the Constitution was written. But those who want to use this argument to suspend the operation of the Constitution effectively want to excuse themselves from the self-accountability of society. These people are not friends of any Left worthy of the name. A fully developed proletarian socialist movement will have to confront the Constitutional order, but there can be no pre-determining of what that confrontation will be other than through the mass attempt to change the world. Short of that, anyone who says that an administrative state can operate free from the Constitution is suspending the fundamental law of society. The progressive critique of the Constitution is not about transforming the Constitutional order but revoking it, so that an administrative state full of law professors and bureaucrats can "nudge" you in the direction you should be living your lives, as Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler put it: you do not know how to live your life, and these people with superior expertise will gather the administrative state to nudge you — not force you — into living the way you should appropriately live.[5] Rather than create a new political regime that will supersede the Constitutional order while remaining accountable to a changing society, they want to terminate the freedom of society altogether. They have no interest in the kind of social transformation necessary to transcend that order. Their interest is simply to suspend the operation of the fundamental law so that they themselves can be an arbitrary power, an alien power not immanent to society but ruling above it. **| P**

Transcribed by Will Stratford

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[1] Video of the event is available at <https://youtu.be/rbAURJc1d9c>.

[2] Bernard Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, eds. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 3–31.

[3] In *Collected Political Writings of James Otis*, ed. Richard Samuelson (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2015), 119–82, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/collected-political-writings#lf1644_label_097>.

[4] John Adams to William Tudor, Jr. (February 16, 1823), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7769>.

[5] Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

"Bonapartism is not Bonaparte," continued from page 3

as occupying itself with the True, has to do with the *eternally present*. Nothing in the past is lost for it, for the Idea is ever present; Spirit is immortal; with it there is no past, no future, but an essential now. This necessarily implies that the present form of Spirit comprehends within it all earlier steps. These have indeed unfolded themselves in succession independently; but what Spirit is it has always been essentially; distinctions are only the development of this essential nature. The life of the ever present Spirit is a circle of progressive embodiments, which looked at in one aspect still exist beside each other, and only as looked at from another point of view appear as past. The grades which Spirit seems to have left behind it, it still possesses in the depths of its present. . . .

"Spirit once more driven back upon itself, produces its work in an intellectual shape, and becomes capable of realizing the Ideal of Reason from the Secular principle alone. Thus it happens, that in virtue of elements of Universality, which have the principle of Spirit as their basis, the empire of Thought is established actually and concretely. The antithesis of Church and State vanishes. The Spiritual becomes reconnected with the Secular, and develops this latter as an independently organic existence. The State no longer occupies a position of real inferiority to the Church, and is no longer subordinate to it. The latter asserts no prerogative, and the Spiritual is no longer an element foreign to the State. Freedom has found the means of realizing its Ideal — its true existence. This is the ultimate result which the process of History is intended to accomplish, and we have to traverse in detail the long track which has been thus cursorily traced out. Yet length of Time is something entirely relative, and the element of Spirit is Eternity. Duration, properly speaking, cannot be said to belong to it."

[3] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, second ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 608.

[4] Ibid., 603.

[5] *The Fable of the Bees* (1714).

[6] Hegel, *Introduction*, 34.

[7] Theodor W. Adorno, "Those Twenties" (1962), in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 47.

[8] Theodor W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory" (1942), in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader, ed. Rolf Tiedemann*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 110.

[9] "Pseudo-politics" and "pseudo-reality" are terms of Adorno; the "normative psychosis of the political social world" is a phrase by the Marxist-informed Freudian psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell: "the normative delusions of an acceptable psychotic status quo, which is what our political world very often is." See E. Efe Çakmak and Bülent Somay, "There is never a psychopathology without the social context: An interview with Juliet Mitchell," *Eurozine* (April 12, 2006), <https://www.eurozine.com/there-is-never-a-psychopathology-without-the-social-context/>.

My third example of socialists lionizing 1776 is when American socialist icon Eugene Debs, made a similar kind of argument in his Independence Day Address of 1901.[13] He argued that the framers of the Constitution saw equality as being just for themselves, the rich property owners, and thereby felt able to legitimize slavery for example, while the Declaration of Independence was imbued with the genius of free institutions.

Daniel Lazare: America is a complicated and mysterious place. It seems simple on the surface, but when you penetrate beneath the surface, it gets a lot more complicated. I want to explore some of the paradoxes and contradictions of the American Revolution. I want to begin by discussing three revolutions: one which broke out in 1787 in Belgium, another in France in 1789, and the third, the American Revolution, which broke out in 1775–76.

The Belgian Revolution is the least known but, in some ways, it is extremely relevant to the American Revolution. Belgium was a federation ruled by the Austrian Hapsburgs and it had a constitution dating back to the late Middle Ages. When I say a constitution, I mean an accepted way of running society. Society was run through myriad interlocking institutions — monasteries, guilds, bishoprics,[14] tariffs — a whole late-medieval maze. In 1787, the Hapsburg emperor Joseph II, the model of an enlightened despot, sought to modernize Belgium, sweeping away the ancient medieval structure and imposing an egalitarian and efficient form of government. The result was a revolution. Belgians rose up in arms in defense of their ancient institutions and were ultimately crushed in 1790. This was a revolution *against* the Enlightenment; it was the model of a conservative revolution that was fought in defense of the *ancien régime*, which the Belgians saw as the freest form of government possible.

We go forward two years to the events in Paris, preceded by a similar conservative revolt by the nobility against the attempts of Charles Calonne, the finance minister of Louis XVI, to solve the taxation problem in 1787. That revolt was crushed, but two years later a different revolt arose, one made by the Third Estate. Whereas the Belgian and French nobles had arisen in defense of the *ancien régime*, the French Revolution in 1789 went to war against the *ancien régime*. The French Revolution was a great modernizing revolution because its aim was to sweep away all the medieval appurtenances and replace it with something that was streamlined, efficient, and modern.

We have two revolutions, one anti-*ancien régime* and the other pro-*ancien régime*. To which category does the American Revolution belong? It clearly follows the Belgian model much more closely. America in the 18th century was the freest, wealthiest, and most democratic place — for white American males — on Earth. Americans had a high degree of democratic self-governance extending back to the 17th century. As far as they were concerned, that was a heritage worth defending.

The British were also modernizers trying to put the empire on a more modern footing. After the Seven Years' War they decided to reorganize finances and to try to impose taxes on the Americans the same way Calonne had tried to impose new taxes on the French. The Americans' objection to the Stamp Tax was not merely that it had been imposed by Parliament without consulting them but that it was new; it broke with tradition; they saw it as an attack on their ancient liberties. So, the American Revolution was much closer to the conservative Belgian Revolution and to the conservative 1787 revolt of the nobles in France than it was to what followed in France in 1789.

That suggests that the American Revolution was a reactionary revolt, however, this is where it gets complicated. Because America was the freest, most democratic place on Earth prior to 1775 it was a conservative revolt in defense of the highest level of democracy existing to date. So it was both conservative *and* democratic, but its concept of democracy was thoroughly conservative in that it saw liberty as ancient and primordial, something that Americans had gained merely by virtue of moving to the New World. It believed that change was almost always tyrannical and injurious to liberty and the result, among other things, was the U.S. Constitution, which made great concessions to the need for a quasi-centralized modern nation state but which still tried to codify liberties that existed since time immemorial. The Second Amendment is the perfect example of that, where the right to bear arms is seen as an essential pillar of liberty and therefore must not be disturbed.

When we deal with America, we are dealing with a country whose revolutionary heritage paradoxically is a conservative one — which explains a great deal of our society today — and which cannot imagine a modern socialist concept of democracy that flows from the French revolutionary concept. America eventually did have its second Jacobin stage but that happened in 1861, when Lincoln essentially carried out a Jacobin program in which he crushed states' rights, centralized power, and imposed an industrial program. That, to a certain extent, did bring America into the modern age, although it did not get rid of that conservative heritage altogether.

The French Revolution is a starting point for any kind of modern socialist politics. The American Revolution has to be approached cautiously and critically and seen as a product of the pre-modern era. The question is whether America is the last *ancien régime* left in the modern, advanced capitalist world.

Matei Alexandriu: I will be discussing how I approach the American Revolution and its legacy from a Marxist perspective. I disagree that it was a reactionary revolt. I agree that the demands of the American revolutionaries constituted the preservation of an existing system, but they were comparatively more democratic and represented a more open level of public participation in politics than a monarchy would have allowed.

In terms of the enduring revolutionary legacy of the American Revolution, I am constantly faced with the task of contending with it as a Marxist while keeping my Marxism intact. I have to square the circle that the American Revolution and its ideas eventually produced the French Revolution; from that French revolutionary tradition, we got French socialism, and out of French socialism we got Marxism. I can draw a continuous line from the American revolutionary tradition to the Marxist revolutionary tradition that I am operating on today.

It is at this point in the conversation that a lot of American socialists start to lose themselves in the legacy of that Revolution. It is easy for us to look at the Revolutionary period as one whose actors were thoroughly committed to freedom, and then we lost that spirit somewhere along the way, giving way to a corporate takeover that now dominates our country. This isn't a correct interpretation of American history.

I only have to go as far as the *Federalist Papers* (1787–88) to understand that what we would describe as a corporate government mentality existed just as explicitly in the first generations of this country. There we find James Madison talking about how the source of political factions is inequality of property, but rather than address the need to equalize people's access to property he takes the perspective that the state plays the role of mediating whatever conflicts arise as a result of that inequality. Then we have Alexander Hamilton describing his contemporary project as a commercial republic. From the outset, the American Revolution had a scope that saw beyond the rights of monarchy, but it channeled its new rights directly into the hands of its capitalist elements; it did that from the start and explicitly.

What should socialists learn from 1776? We should appreciate that there is no Marxism that does not draw its lineage back to that Revolution. But we should also understand that for however revolutionary it was at the time, it is incompatible with a working-class revolution. The Constitution paid credence to someone's right to life but it had no such respect for the material basis of life: food, shelter, transportation, communication, healthcare –– all of these things are not provided for.

If there were a movement today that arose in defense of the Constitution as opposed to a more extensive and universal set of rights, it would be reactionary. There was a point in time when this evolution from monarchy to commercial republic did increase the amount of people who could freely take part in the political process, but capitalism and the capitalist republic has maxed out on the number of people it is willing to include in that process.

In 1776, the American Revolution and the constitutional order it produced were comparatively revolutionary. Nowadays they represent the rights of capital. They have nothing to do with universal rights or true democracy. Today we have to look at this revolutionary legacy as something to overcome. If we are going to build a revolutionary movement, we have to understand that it is going to be opposed to the existing constitutional order. We cannot work with them; they do not want to work with us. We must build our own new world.

Responses

BS: I noticed a lot of focus on the internal mechanisms of the United States — its constitution, its internal political rule. The biggest problem with the U.S. is that it is not large enough. It is federalism in one country, so it cannot govern capital mobility. You can putz around with the constitutional rules in all kinds of ways, but it does not solve the central problem that we face: money goes all over the world when you try to confront it in any way.

That is something that has not come up at all: the global character of all of this. It is not something that can be done with good national institutions. It is a problem of the structure of the entire supranational system. To change that, we would need a kind of federalism that can expand and which people in other parts of the world want to be part of. The kind of federalism that we currently have — in part because of the legacy of the 20th century — does not have the legitimacy to expand. It can't just be an expansion of this federal system nor just replacing one kind of national democracy with another kind. We need to construct something supranational that people all around the world would be able to join us in doing.

TC: Matei articulated clearly the exact position I was taught in Britain as a teenager; it is what I take to be the Marxist position. The question then becomes: why would a Marxist organization be interested in the American Revolution? It is presumably because Marxism is seen as being, if not dead, in a very fundamental crisis. What is the basis of that crisis?

In Domenico Losurdo's screed on Western Marxism,[15] he makes the distinction between "Western" and "Eastern" Marxism. It seems that, as they are defined by Losurdo, both are a result of the conscious refusal of the working class in the West to aspire to proletarian subjectivity. I would argue that is why people are supposed to look back to previous revolutions, like the American and the French, and we cannot just carry on with the old Marxist discourse.

DL: Yes, the American Revolution inspired the French Revolution to a degree, but the French Revolution rapidly eclipsed the American Revolution. The Americanists in France during the French Revolution were quickly shut out of the political process; the radical elements were dismissive of America, and they left the American example far behind. The Declaration of Independence got a lot of play in Europe; the U.S. Constitution was almost completely ignored, and it had little influence there. The Americans were more democratic than George III but more conservative. They were more backward looking, less modern. That made them diametrically opposed to the French Revolution, so there is no continuous line. The French Revolution breaks off history. Everything before the French Revolution is pre-modern; everything after is modern.

It was the planter elements in the U.S. who benefitted from the American Revolution. I was taken aback by hearing John Adams being quoted on the necessity of freedom for laborers; how about the slaves? The American Revolution strengthened slavery. The Constitution, this document of freedom, actually served the opposite purpose.

An international federation? The international project is called revolutionary socialism. The aim is a revolutionary socialist republic. American federalism is terrible, and the idea of extending it to the world fills me with utter horror

MA: I agree; the idea of expanding the American republic into other parts of the world horrifies me. The other thing that stuck out is this alleged death of Marxism, which I struggle to see in the world. Marxism breathes life every day that there are American socialists contending together about how to build revolution. Corpses do not enter battle, so Marxism must still be alive.

What is the metric for reaction? Is it time or is it policy? If we were to use the metric of time, then democracy itself is a reaction. Were not the Athenians first to the punch on this one? I would argue that it is the nature of the policy, the fraction of people that are introduced into political participation, that makes a movement reactionary or revolutionary.

The American Revolution certainly swept away monarchy — Marx describes a new environment of antagonisms. Once we got through the struggle between the monarchists and the republicans, the remaining struggle was the struggle between capital and slavery, which developed and culminated with the Civil War. The new struggle is the working class and the capitalist class. At the end of the day, a democratic movement cannot possibly be more reactionary than a monarchist movement.

Q&A

While we have been talking about 1776, we have focused more on the political side of the Revolution; the emphasis has been on the democratic credentials of the American Revolution. How do you see the American Revolution living on in civil society?

TC: One way in which the American Revolution has been invoked is in populist resistance to what is seen as an encroaching administrative state. Trumpism is very much connected to that. It is complicated because the administrative state can enhance the pursuit of happiness. There are real problems with the administrative state, and one needs to democratize and humanize it, but it needs to be seen as an instrument for the pursuit of happiness.

The disavowal of the American Revolution on the panel seems to be a fringe opinion of the anti-liberal Left. How do you get from that view of history to organizing a mass workers' movement when most American workers would be offended by this idea and shut off from being organized in a mass sense?

DL: American democracy is in ruins. The country is in a state of extreme crisis. The Senate is a marvel of anti-democracy; the House is gerrymandered; the Electoral College gives lily-white Wyomingites nearly four times as much clout in presidential elections as Californians. This is an atrocity. America is flamboyantly undemocratic, and any mass workers' movement must contend with that. It has to be anti-Constitutional.

MA: We have been contending for the past 50 years with how to bring socialist ideas to the working class. We have tried to be progressive democrats. We have tried to be socialists who do not talk about socialism. My thought at this point is that we are not being as full-throated about our socialism as we ought to be; nobody follows timidity.

Benjamin Constant differentiated between ancient liberty and freedom of the moderns to criticize the French Revolution for being overly invested in the ancient rather than modern idea of freedom, which would be concerned with the freedom of society rather than the modernization of the state.[16] *Have you considered this differentiation?*

DL: The classical models were important but there is no doubt that the French Revolution conceived of democracy very differently. The French Revolution took this ancient idea and rapidly broke through it and created something far more radical and modern. Whereas the U.S. Constitution strengthened state rights, one of the first acts of the National Assembly was to break up provinces and turn them into uniform *départments*.

BS: There is a tendency to essentialize the French and American Revolutions. When we describe a "French" Revolution as opposed to an "American" Revolution and set up a binary between these two things, it is a stylized argument to try to shift people to a particular view that you have but it has nothing really to do with history. There are immanent reasons in each of these contexts for why these different views came up, the discussion of which requires a historically rooted approach. We should keep our focus on the American Revolution rather than make binary comparisons.

DL: With the partial exception of Alexander Hamilton, there was no one in America who understood democracy as a forward-moving revolutionary movement. That idea was invented by the French.

BS: Democracy is not the central concept in the French Revolution.

DL: Of course it is.

What if we just say, "the Bourgeois Revolution"? I tend to see the American and French Revolutions together. What is the legacy of the Bourgeois Revolution for the Left?

DL: France is a classic bourgeois revolution. The Jacobins had a bourgeois program based on the government taking charge of industrialization. Capitalism was a small element in America in the 1770s — it was underdeveloped. American industrialization only followed the Revolution by 20–40 years. You can say the American Revolution lay the basis for that capitalist explosion, but it really was not a bourgeois revolution in the same sense that the French Revolution was.

Something that radical Republicans pointed out at the time of the Civil War is that you could enfranchise all the enslaved people of South Carolina, and they would be re-enslaved by the majority of South Carolinians. Clearly there is something more going on than democracy.

DL: Democracy has to be redefined and revolutionized. If we conceive of democracy as a national democratic dictatorship, then of course it would not tolerate any attempt to resurrect slavery.

But what if people democratically wanted that?

DL: It would not happen because the democratic revolution would have to be made against all those forces. A revolutionary dictatorship in the 1860s would have prevented any racist resurgence. Liberals talk about democracy taking an illiberal turn. That is called Donald Trump. Trump is not a part of democracy; he is a part of democratic breakdown. The answer to Trump is true democracy, which can only be brought about by a revolutionary proletariat.

What are the stakes of these differing interpretations of the American Revolution? Are we having an arid, historical dispute? Are we disputing advertising or recruiting tactics for various political parties? Are we attempting to discipline and understand our sentiments? Or is there something that we are learning theoretically in our appraisal of the American Revolution?

MA: From a Leftist perspective, no one should just be defending the American Revolution. If these conversations about the legacy of the American Revolution are not parlayed into a conversation about how to build a workers' republic, we are neck deep in sophistry; we are not doing anything useful.

DL: This debate is relevant to programmatic implications. Any workers' revolution must be internationalist, and internationalism means breaking free of narrow, national traditions. If you somehow see the American Revolution as a framework for socialism in any respect, that implies that you are operating within an American ideological framework. An internationalist framework is critical of all national traditions, especially one's own. It means dissecting the American Revolution in the most unsparing manner and pointing out all aspects of it that were reactionary.

Trotsky, in his work on the permanent revolution,[17] discussed all those aspects of Russian development that were peculiar to Russia, which, he argued, had great implications for revolutionary struggle. He went way back in Russian history and tried to show the problems that were posed by Russian history and to deal with them in as objective — scientific, but ruthless — a manner as possible. American revolutionaries must do the same thing; they must grapple head on with this so-called revolutionary past, discuss what was revolutionary about it, and demand a complete revamp, root-and-branch of American politics and institutions.

BS: I am not here to affirm or negate the American Revolution; I am here to tarry with it. The American Revolution is not to be liked or disliked. We are in it; it is here. We have to do something in it, and the question is what is possible within it. **| P**

Transcribed by Andrew Tan

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[1] See also Noah Rogers, "'The right enemies': An interview with Matei Alexandriu," in this issue of the *Platypus Review*.

[2] Daniel Lazare, *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralyzing Democracy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996).

[3] See, e.g., Daniel Lazare, "Is the Constitution Unconstitutional?," *Democratic Constitution* (August 9, 2024), <https://democraticconstitutionblog.substack.com/p/is-the-constitution-unconstitutional?>.

[4] See, e.g., Daniel Lazare, "Ditch the constitution," *Weekly Worker* 1489 (May 2, 2024), <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1489/ditch-the-constitution/>.

[5] Benjamin Studebaker, *The Chronic Crisis of American Democracy: The Way is Shut* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

[6] Video of the panel is available at <https://youtu.be/Jm03YkksjN4>.

[7] See John Adams to Abigail Adams (May 12, 1780), <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17800512jasecond>: "I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine." On this, see Benjamin Studebaker, "Beyond Bonapartism: Breaking statephobic thought taboos," *Platypus Review* 166 (May 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/05/01/beyond-bonapartism-breaking-statephobic-thought-taboos/>.

[8] [Ancient Greek] Sensual or passionate love, etc.

[9] [Ancient Greek] (1) The love of God for man and of man for God; (2) alms, charity, etc.

[10] This phrase was included in the initial design for the seal of the United States that was submitted by Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams.

[11] See Earl Browder, "What is Communism? 8: Americanism––Who are the Americans?," *New Masses*, June 25, 1935, 13–15, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/browder/what-is-8.pdf>.

[12] The inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," articulated in the Declaration of Independence (1776), were a revision of John Locke's earlier formulation of "life, liberty, and property."

[13] Eugene Debs, "Eugene Debs's Independence Day Address" (July 4, 1901), *Jacobin* (July 4, 2020), <https://jacobin.com/2020/07/eugene-debs-independence-day-address-fourth-july>.

[14] A district under a bishop's control; a diocese.

[15] Domenico Losurdo, *Western Marxism: How it was Born, How it Died, How it can be Reborn*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2024). See Tom Canel, "Go East, young Marxist? A review of Domenico Losurdo's *Western Marxism*," Platypus Review 172 (December 2024 – January 2025), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/12/05/go-east-young-marxist-a-review-of-domenico-losurdos-western-marxism/>.

[16] See Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns" (1819), in *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 307–28.

[17] See Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (1906), especially "The Peculiarities of Russian Historical Development." See also Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution* (1930).